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Traditional Management of Water in Nagaland: A case study of Kohima District

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Abstract: *Traditionally from the earliest times the belief of the Nagas was such that a person did not view himself as standing outside nature but as dependent on it. Since their very existence depended on the environment, Naga tribes managed forest and water resources carefully and reverently. Water was seen as a very precious resource and its management and preservation involved the community as a whole; this involved the khels, the clans and the family. Well defined boundaries allocated within the village, and between villages, and tribes, left little room for conflict. However, it is also true that every village jealously guarded its territories from its neighbours. Any infringement of territories was settled first through dialogue and only if this failed, through bloody wars which involved headhunting.*

In recent years the water situation has developed incrementally, but dramatically, showing a situation where its finite and fragile water resources are stressed and depleting while different sectoral demands are growing rapidly. Water has become an important issue in Nagaland as in other parts of the country and it is clearly seen that the government alone is not able to provide necessary expansion of services to a growing population both in the rural or urban areas, mainly due to the unique situation Nagaland is facing.

The forests and water resources except those under government reserved areas are still under the control and management of the land owners. After independence, the 371A of the constitution granted a special status to Nagaland State, enabling the people to be protected and governed by Naga customary law and procedures; including the ownership and transfer of land and its resources. In such a situation the Nagaland government continues to struggle to find a common platform with the landowners to obtain sharing rights of water resources. Therefore, it has been seen as essential to study the broad spectrum of traditional management of water resources, in order to understand the unique water situation prevailing in Nagaland.

Keywords: Water Management, Tradition, Kohima, Water scarcity, Nagaland

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Introduction

The traditional method of water management among the Naga Hill tribes in the pre-colonial period, their use by local communities, the continued existence of people dependent on the land and water, the degree of control by the individual community, village, khel, clan and family; show more similarities than differences in practices, customs and beliefs. Each tribe had a well defined territory and within that space permanent inter-village land demarcations except in a few instances, was a determining factor as how the water that was drawn naturally became in course of time the subject of all sorts of rights, rights of purchase, of custom and of inheritance. For this paper, although emphasis has generally been on the Naga Hills as a whole, in depth focus is on traditional water management in Kohima District.

In Nagaland, for defence purposes the earliest Naga Villages made settlements on top of high hills and ridges. In their natural state these hills were covered with evergreen forests. The first settlers selected this site both because of its strategic location on top of a ridge and also because of the availability of natural springs, other than just the rivers and streams flowing in the lower valleys. Usually the priest together with the inhabitants of the new village performed elaborate cleansing ceremonies for good fortune of the colonists. Water was regarded as a very valuable property. Since the land and the forest provided everything to them, villagers jealously protected the land of the forefathers from neighbouring villages and enemies' occupation.

A.W. Davis has stated that "For tribes like the Angamis, Lhotas, and Aos, who live in permanent and large villages, and amongst whom land is none too plentiful, we find that the rights of individuals to property in land are well known and well recognized, and the rules as to inheritance and partition of such property settled by strict customary laws." [1] The general pattern of the traditional land holding, its locale and division among the various tribes and the diverse villages was correlated to the nature of water usage and ownership. Further intricacies such as kinship connections through tribe, village, khel, clan and family involved in a range of support, sharing of resources and expertise led to not just the interpretations of water rights and

ownership of various Naga tribes' but with striking differences evident in the sphere of cultivation and the use of water.

Most of the tribes regarded rivers or streams flowing through their country as belonging to the very villages through whose territories the water flowed. The village considered it as common property and no individual rights could be established in such instances. Villagers without any restriction could access the forest of the village. They were allowed to hunt, fish, draw water from rivers or streams, make use of forest resource by collecting medicinal herbs or even cut down trees to be used as building materials for various uses. For domestic purposes, villagers dependent on pond water for cooking, washing, drinking and usually collected by women and were carried on a bamboo vessel. Community labour was involved in the construction or repairing or improvement of bridle-paths through the forest connecting the village with other villages and paths leading to the rice fields. In the same way, village water tanks, and traditional water wells or ponds were repaired or maintained well. Every morung member took the responsibility for cleaning and use of the water source. If a person failed to join the community without reasonable excuse on that day he was fined accordingly.

The lands of each village were well defined, except in a few cases and fish-bearing streams were also well defined areas. Between different villages, sometimes there were disputes over the boundary and fishery cases. In an early case of conflict in the Ao country, "the people of Mübongchoküt (Molodubia) village claimed absolute rights to the Mělăk River, for some forty miles, because that stream had its source near their lands." [2] However, there were also instances where in some portions in a river two villages shared the river boundary. In such cases villagers from both villages could practice fishing without any conflict. About once each year a village will turn out as a whole to go fishing; and, several kinds of bark, roots, seeds, or nuts, pounded into a pulpy mass and mixed with mud, were dumped into the stream to poison the water. The poison either killed the fish or stupefied the fish. To prevent the fish from floating away, a bamboo fence was built across the stream some distance down. Neighbouring villages were given pre-hand information before any communal fishing was organized.

Tribes such as the Aos, Lothas, Semas, and trans-Dikhu and Tizu tribes cultivated their fields by *jhuming*. The jungle growing on the hill-side is cut down, and the undergrowth is burned, the larger trees being left to rot where they lie. The ground is then lightly hoed over, and seeds of rice, maize, millet, Job's tears (Coix Lacryma), chillies, and various kinds of vegetables dibbled in. The same plot of land is cropped for only two years in succession, and then allowed to lie fallow for eight to nine years. Further cropping would be liable to destroy the roots of *irka* and bamboo, whose ashes serve for manure when the land is next cleared for cultivation, while after the second harvest weeds spring up with such rapidity as to be a serious impediment to cultivation. Cotton crop was grown on the northern ridges, by the Lothas and the Aos.[3] The land left fallow, and which had been taken up again were defined with markers such as stone boundary, trees or other marks. Trespassing was dealt with seriously and no one cut wood or bamboo on the land of another.

However, those from southern part of Nagaland exhibited the wet-rice terraced cultivation, using an elaborate system of terracing and irrigation, connecting it to water sources by channels sometimes even measured in miles; but it is practiced side by side with jhuming. As early as 1840- 41, Robinson gave a description of agriculture in the Naga Hills thus, "every portion of cultivable land is most carefully terraced up the hills, as far as rivulets can be commended for the irrigation of the beds; in these localities."[4] From the rivulets and water splashes, the main source of irrigation, channels of enormous length are dug to carry water and overflow the terraces. Bamboo pipes sometimes serve as supplementary irrigational means down the slopes where terraces are located.[5] There was no knowledge in the past of the use of the plough animals among the Naga tribes for wet cultivation. Difference in the cultivation methods of the Naga tribes led to the evolution of water rights peculiar to their own country, sometimes leading to very complicated, litigious water affairs.

Cultivation of crops was dependent on rainfall; absence of enough rainfall foretold poor harvest for that year and therefore specific elaborate rain making ceremonies were performed by most tribes. Many Naga tribes believed in the existence of a group of spirits that inhabited the dense and foggy forests and man eaters who carry off the

human being to unknown destinations, usually towards the rivers. For instance, the Ao tribe calls this ceremony as "*Tsukulemmong*" which literally means "water worship" ceremony. Prayers were offered to "*Anungtsungba*"- the god of sky and rain, to send more rain for that period of scarcity. The Naga world was full of spirits, every tree, shrub, hillock or body of water in the forest, harboured a spirit or demon. The cause of all natural phenomena such as illness, rainfall, wind, thunderstorms was attributed to these spirits. Man was considered an integral part of this animated nature. Therefore it was essential to appease these spirits through various ceremonies, and rituals and to make amends, thus redressing the natural balance. The belief of the Nagas was such that a person did not view himself as standing outside nature but as dependent on it. Festivals were also divided into two broad categories: spring festivals at sowing stage involved purification and renewal and harvest festivals were performed in thanksgiving to the godlings at harvest time.

Kohima District

Mezoma, Phesama, Viswema, Jotsoma, Jakhama, Kigwema and Khonoma villages has been taken as illustration for this paper. Most of the Angami villages, as of now, had at least a river or two in close vicinity while some obtained its supply of water from a spring outside the village. The use of forest and water resources differed from village to village. A big village would frequently have several water-holes, but in some villages the supply being scarce, the labour intensive work caused the people to apply economy in its use.[6] Thepfürülie Zutso, from Kigwema Village gives the example of his village stating that, "Kigwema was said to have migrated from Kezhakeno since time immemorial. Jakhama and Phesama are its neighbouring villages. Within the village there are five (5) khels. Like the other villages, every khel had its own water tanks constructed below the village. The traditional well and the natural spring wells were used from forefathers' time. People would also go to field to wash and to take bath. The land was inherited and the forest and rivers were the main boundaries for the village between the clans or individuals. There was a story of two true friends in the village called Seca and Pfükha, such were their closeness that they even shared a common forest area."[7]

Initially the forest and its resources was all common property, later it was divided into parts i.e., clans and family to individual. Mhiesizokho Zinyü, from Khonoma village elucidates that, “Forest and water resources belonged to different khels in the past. In some small villages like Dzüleke or Menguju in Western Angami area the entire forest as well as water resources belonged to the community, but in large villages like Mezoma, Khonoma and Jotsoma, ownership is claimed by different khels.” [8] Krorovi Peseyie from Jotsoma village, states that, “Villagers take the view that Jotsoma shares twelve boundary with villages from Japfü to Tsiesema to Meriema till Mengujüma village and had no disputes land with neighbouring villages. Water and natural resources to the construction of canals was not prohibited and villagers who discovered ponds usually named it after themselves. Underground (spring) water was used in Jotsoma from the earlier period. In terms of ownership, there was some dissimilarity. Rivers had no ownership whereas ponds and lakes had ownership.” [9] People considered water as a free gift of nature and copious. Water was free of cost, it did not have a price however, and the water which flowed through a particular stretch of land was taken as belonging to the land owner. From Mezoma village, Zapuvisie Lhousa highlights the background of his village, articulating that “Mezoma is a village of ‘kekuo krhie’ which means it has historical importance for the Angami Nagas. It comprises of three khels and every khel has its own morung. It has a river flowing through its forest and this river later joins with the Khonoma River and finally flows to Dzüda. People in the past days got water from the canals which were brought from the river and every khel had one such provision. However, the most common place for easy access to water were ponds near the village or lakes. It is also said that villagers were advised to use water judiciously and not waste water as it was a precious commodity.” [10] Pukron Kikhi from Viswema village affirms that, “There was freedom to access water anywhere in the village forest. Even in the case of scarcity, water was not sold, people could get it from within the village, sometimes even from another khel, free of cost.” [11] As water was considered as common property, the people were not allowed to sell their property to people outside the village. An individual could only sell or exchange his forest (area) to anybody in case of poverty.

Water was used mainly for agriculture purpose. Rainfall being very heavy in the region, the Angamis and its neighbours in the north followed an elaborate system of terracing and irrigation. According to the local traditions, the Angami terrace system is as old as the tribe itself, the system believed to have been brought from its ancient home. The Angami Naga villages were surrounded by admirably constructed terrace fields cut up along the rugged hills sometimes high up to over 6,000 feet. It was built up with stone retaining walls at diverse levels, and irrigated by means of skillfully constructed channels, which distribute the water over each step in series. Terraces leaned up against the stone retaining walls at different levels get themselves protected from the soil erosion and facilitate regularize distribution of irrigation. This system of cultivation is believed to have extended northwards from Manipur and to have been adopted by the Angamis (as some would believe), partly from their desire for better kinds of grain than Job's tears and millet, as *jhum* rice does not thrieve well at elevations much exceeding 4,000 feet and partly from a scarcity of *jhum* lands.[12] H.H. Godwin Austin in his survey report, mentions about his astonishment at beholding the Angami countryside for the very first time, saying, "Where the steep rise in the slope commences, the spurs are at once more level, and are terraced for rice cultivation; not a square yard of available land has been left, and the system of irrigation canals is well laid out. I have never even in the better cultivated parts of the Himalayas seen terrace cultivation carried to such perfection, and it gives a peculiarly civilized appearance to the country." [13]

During his visit to the Angami country in 1936 with J.P. Mills, the Deputy Commissioner of the administered Naga Hills; Haimendorf describes a fascinating scene of water tapping to irrigate the terraced fields.

> 'The water flows down from one terrace to the one below, and a complicated system of water rights governs the distribution of the precious liquid. The share in a spring can be bought in exactly the same way as a field. Nocturnal theft of water, by illegitimate tapping of the channels, often caused quarrels that ultimately came before the Deputy Commissioner's court in Kohima.' [14]

Channels of water from some stream or torrent, irrigated the terraced rice-fields sometimes measuring into miles which fed many fields on the way. Traditional

ponds were dug for drinking purposes near the village. There was access to water anywhere in the village and villagers could go to any village spring to fetch and carry water in their clay pots. A village with vast land area used it more for jhum cultivation than wet-terrace type cultivation and such a village could even spare land for the neighbouring village to cultivate and earn their living. Water rights in an Angami village were made complicated by the fact that ownership of terraced fields was not communistic but strictly individual. The first man to dig a channel tapping some new stream claimed ownership to the water drawn from the channel to the exclusion of anyone else wishing to tap the stream higher up; the water which flowed in their land belong to them. However, certain large streams like the *siju* were regarded as common property. The water that was drawn naturally became in the course of time itself the subject of all sorts of rights, rights of purchase, of custom and of inheritance. Water is divided up, either by tapping the channels or by portioning them into two or more runnels, and rights of overflow, tapping, etc., may be transferred. It may thus happen that one man's fields will be dry while those immediately adjoining will be flooded, or a field at the end of one line is dry while that immediately above is full, the water had to go right away round the spur of a hill and back again before the dry field gets its share.[15]

The forest and rivers were the main boundaries for the village between the clans or individuals. But there were no restrictions for hunting; fishing and water. Pheluokhwe Kirha, from Jakhama village states that "There were eight khels in Jakhama village and each khel had a traditional well. The women would fetch water for household needs from these wells only in the morning. Water was fetched from a pot called "Meshü." There was no scarcity of water in the village. The villages had clear cut demarcations and plenty of resources; therefore there was no fighting over forest and water. The villagers and the clans collectively construct water tanks where the land owner donates land for free. However, forest had more common property compared to water resources." [16] If there were any conflicts within any village (khels) or between villages, it was usually settled through dialogue by elders of the villages with equal representatives from the various Khels. The spot in question would be visited first before pronouncement of any kind of judgment. "Kenyü" which means

taboo was strictly used in such cases. Fines imposed consisted of seven times (*se thenie*) of the item stolen (may be articles, or wood, or bamboo, or stone etc).

Many Naga tribes believed in the existence of a group of spirits that inhabited the dense and foggy forests and man eaters who carry off the human being to unknown destinations, usually towards the rivers. The Angami tribe in common with the other tribes, believed in the supernatural but made no attempt whatever to produce in carving or picture the image of the deities ("terhoma") or spiritual beings. The Angamis were animists in the past and many rituals performed were tied and related to the forest and water. Chief among the deities or spirits is the "Kepenopfü" or the "Ukepenopfü". Among the legions of *terhoma,* a vast majority are unknown by name, unspecified, vague inhabitants of the invisible world. The spirits specially associated with the forests and water was: *Dzürawü* / *Dzüraü* -goddess of fishing and *Chiehie* god of wild animals; *Kechi-ke-kho* the spirit or species of spirit, which inhabits stones and *Tekhu-rho*, a god of tigers etc. Thepfürülie Zutso, from Kigwema mentions about "certain rituals were practiced in Japfü Mountain where villagers gathered to pray for rain. They had the belief that they would be blessed with a good amount of rainfall and also water from the mountain." But worship of any object such as wood, stone or water source was not known. For most sowing and reaping ceremonies, the village priest would bathe in the river water as a process of ritual purification. During the 'Sekrenyi' festival only the man- folk were allowed to fetch water for rituals to purify their souls.

Conclusion: Traditional approach to management of water resources had been in practice in Nagaland from the earliest times with only a few changes implemented wherever necessary. Even in the post-colonial set up under the 371A of the constitution, the customary rights of the various tribes protects traditional ownership of land, forest and water, except those under the government reserved areas. This has generated a unique situation in particular to that pertaining to water resources and water supply as traditional land owners continue to have control over their land and have a final say in this issue. It has therefore become pertinent to study the traditional approach to management of water resources, without undermining it because these traditional practices which have long protected the people has also

become an issue of conflict, between communities as well as between communities and the government.

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